

INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS  
FREEDOM ACT

The SPEAKER pro tempore. Under the Speaker's announced policy of January 19, 1999, the gentleman from Virginia (Mr. WOLF) is recognized during morning hour debates for 5 minutes.

Mr. WOLF. Mr. Speaker, 6 months ago today President Clinton signed the International Religious Freedom Act into law. The law mandates that within 120 days of enactment individuals shall be named to the Commission on International Religious Freedom created by the bill.

It has been 6 months since enactment of the bill, 2 months past the deadline, and the White House has still not named its three commissioners. Congress has done its part, but we are still waiting for the administration. When will the White House get serious about implementing this legislation?

In early February, the President spoke before a crowd of religious and political leaders from around the world at the National Prayer Breakfast. He praised the bill and he said he was proud to have signed it. But where is the implementation? Where is the enforcement? Where is the commitment?

The commission's first report on the condition of religious freedom around the world is due on May 1, this Saturday. Because the administration has wasted so much time in making the appointments, there is no way that the commission will meet that date, and it is unlikely that we will see a report this year. Another year wasted while people are being maimed, tortured, beaten, jailed and killed on account of their faith.

I believe it was the administration's intention to miss the May 1 deadline for the commission's report. This ensures this issue will not get a serious examination by an independent entity as the bill intends. It ensures that the administration can continue to fudge the facts instead of taking serious actions against countries that refuse to protect the human rights of religious believers.

The administration never really liked this bill. Secretary Albright spoke out against the bill. Assistant Secretary Eizenstat criticized the bill. But once Congress overwhelmingly, Republicans and Democrats, passed the bill and sent it to the White House, the President had no choice but to sign it. Then he praised it. Now they are stonewalling it on the implementation. All talk, no action. That is how I would describe the action of this administration with regard to human rights: All talk and no action.

The administration's record on promoting human rights is miserable. China's Catholic priests and bishops are still in jail today and have been in there for decades, for decades, and nobody has been appointed to this commission; Protestant pastors and lay people, decades, and nobody has been appointed to the commission. Worshipers being imprisoned, fined.

Freedom House has said the already intense persecution of the underground church in China has intensified since mid-1998. There was no mention of this during the recent summit with the Chinese Premier. Neither was there any discussion about the fact that China has stopped all dialogue with the Dalai Lama over the future status of Tibet, or the Chinese Government-sponsored campaign to encourage Tibetan Buddhists to become atheists.

And I was in Tibet last year, and the persecution of the Buddhists in Tibet is horrible. It is more horrible than anybody realizes. And yet no one from this administration has taken the time to go to Tibet to see how the conditions are.

The church in Hong Kong is being squeezed. The war in Sudan, very little diplomatic effort, 2 million people, mainly Christians, who have been killed for their faith in the last 15 years, and this administration has done nothing. They cannot even appoint the people to the commission that we all passed in a bipartisan manner.

In Vietnam the situation is no better. And the administration has done nothing, nor have they appointed the people. In India, Pakistan, Indonesia, East Timor, atrocities taking place, and they do nothing.

There is so much going on around the world. There is no excuse for this commission not to be given a chance to do its work. That is what Congress, Republican and Democrat, wanted, that is what the American people wanted when it passed the International Religious Freedom Act, which has strong bipartisan support.

The House leadership, both majority and minority leadership, found time to name the 6 commissioners, and the leadership on both sides of the aisle supported this commission. Why cannot the administration find time to appoint these people?

I hope the administration will at least move to appoint people to the commission, 120 days late, on International Religious Freedom. Too much time has been wasted. The lives of innocent people are at stake every day in China, every day in the Sudan, every day in East Timor, every day in Indonesia, and yet 120 days they have missed the deadline.

They are basically in violation of the law. They have had 6 months. Because this administration has taken so long, my guess is that they will appoint people who are weak and ineffectual on this issue.

Mr. Speaker, I hope I am wrong. And if I am wrong, I will be glad to say they have appointed good people and decent people who care deeply about this. But please appoint someone. Appoint someone so the Commission can begin its action.

MEDICARE MUST NOT BE  
PRIVATIZED

The SPEAKER pro tempore. Under the Speaker's announced policy of January 19, 1999, the gentleman from Ohio (Mr. BROWN) is recognized during morning hour debates for 5 minutes.

Mr. BROWN of Ohio. Mr. Speaker, many in Congress have been on a campaign to scare America's seniors into believing that Medicare is going bankrupt. They say Medicare must be privatized in order to save it. Once again, Medicare privatizers and their Medicare campaign are wrong. The trustees of the Medicare Trust Fund have just reported that Medicare will remain solvent through 2015, up from its earlier projection of 2008.

Those in Congress, the think tanks, and the Beltway pundits who want to privatize Medicare are wringing their hands over the trustees' latest report. They believe these new projections will lead Congress to do nothing towards reforming Social Security and Medicare. With the programs projected to last longer, we cannot rest on our laurels, they say.

The real threat to Medicare, however, is not its alleged pending bankruptcy. That is not true. The real threat is a proposal just rejected by the National Medicare Commission to privatize Medicare and deliver it to the private insurance market.

Under a proposal soon to be introduced called premium support, Medicare would no longer pay directly for health care services. Instead, it would provide each senior with a voucher good for part of the premium for private coverage. Medicare beneficiaries could use their voucher to buy into the fee-for-service plan already in effect, sponsored by the Federal Government, or join a private HMO plan.

To encourage consumer price sensitivity, the voucher would track to the lowest cost private plan. Ostensibly, seniors would shop for the plan that best suits their needs, paying the balance of the premium and paying extra if they want higher quality health care. The proposal would create a system of health coverage but, most importantly, it would abandon Medicare's fundamental principle of egalitarianism.

Today, the Medicare program is income-blind. All seniors have access to the same level of quality care. The idea that vouchers would empower seniors to choose a health plan that best suits their needs is a myth. The reality is that seniors will be forced to accept whatever plan they can afford.

The goal of the Medicare Commission was to ensure the program's long-term solvency. The premium support proposal simply will not do that. Supporters of this voucher plan say it could shave 1 percent per year from the Medicare budget over the next few decades. But Bruce Vladeck, a former Medicare administrator, doubted it would save the Federal Government even one dime.